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Inglourious Basterds

Abstract

This is a review of *Inglorious Basterds* (2009).

Quentin Tarantino's new film *Inglourious Basterds* may seem like a strange place to begin a religious debate, but it nevertheless has sparked much of this controversy in the days following its release. Like other recent movies such as *Munich* (Steven Spielberg, 2007) and *Defiance* (Edward Zwick, 2008), *Basterds* centers on the idea of Jews getting revenge against their anti-Semitic foes. However, unlike these other films, *Basterds* is neither based on a true story – in fact, it rewrites history more than it follows – nor directed by somebody with a Jewish background. It is only through understanding Tarantino as an auteur and realizing these contrasting differences that *Basterds* can be fully understood and appreciated.

Throughout his nearly twenty year moviemaking career, Tarantino's films have been a conflation of different genres that he enjoys such as gangster films, blaxploitation films, car movies and kung fu flicks. With *Basterds*, Tarantino follows the guidelines of both spaghetti westerns and World War II films, and provides the occasional twist on the genre; in this case, the reversal of the roles of the Jewish characters from being passive victims to being torturers and murderers. The film follows two divergent plotlines which end up coming together in the end. The first is the spaghetti western-styled story of Shosanna Dreyfuss (Mélanie Laurent), a young French Jew whose family is killed before her eyes by the troops of the cold and calculating Nazi Colonel Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz). Shosanna

barely escapes this assault, and ends up running a Parisian cinema under the identity of Emmanuelle Mimieux. Like Jill McBain (Claudia Cardinale) from Sergio Leone's epic *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), and Tarantino's own creations of *The Bride* and O-Ren Ishii from *Kill Bill* (2003), Shosanna is motivated by the murder of her family to seek revenge against the people that did it – in this case, the Nazi party. She is afforded this opportunity when young German war hero Fredrick Zoller (Daniel Brühl) falls for her and requests that *A Nation's Pride*, a Nazi propaganda film based on his exploits and starring him, holds its premiere at her theater. The other storyline follows in the vein of war movies like *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967). However, unlike *Dirty Dozen's* collection of convicts, *Basterds* features an outfit of American-Jewish soldiers that are recruited by the quarter-Apache Gentile Lieutenant Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) to go behind enemy lines with the sole mission of killing as many Nazis as possible. At Raine's request, the group scalps any dead bodies, and Raine himself carves a Swastika into the forehead of any Nazis they choose to let live.

Most of the criticism of Tarantino's film centers upon the brutal and inhumane treatment of the Nazis by the Basterds. Newsweek's Daniel Mendelsohn finds that Tarantino effectively turns the Jews of his film into the Nazis themselves.¹ Mendelsohn is certainly correct in saying that the Basterds do evoke the horrific killing methods of their enemies. The Nazis were known to have carved

Stars of David into the chests of rabbis whom they had murdered. Moreover, the idea of burning Nazis alive in a locked building is a reversal of traditional, historical anti-Semitic violence (also a major plot point in last year's Holocaust-themed *The Reader*). But the Jews of *Inglorious Basterds* lack the systematic killing methods of the Nazi war machine. The Nazis are not placed in concentration camps, nor killed en masse in any gas chambers. Germans were not ripped from their homes nor forced to live in ghettos. They did not have their children taken from them and murdered. If we find that the Basterds live by the Biblical preaching of "an eye for an eye" (Exod. 21:23-27) as retributive justice, then their actions, no matter how horrific, still may not have been enough to equal the Nazi atrocities. (I certainly am not advocating that the Basterds – nor anyone, for that matter – should commit these actions to get justice, but merely stating that the analogy made by Mendelsohn is not completely fulfilled).

Throughout Tarantino's cinema, revenge is an act that is always justified. This belief is based in the genres which Tarantino reveres like the spaghetti western and the kung fu film: the person seeking their revenge will always be satisfied by the end, even if it costs them their own life. For Tarantino, the idea of revenge is even seen as an act of God. As The Bride says in *Kill Bill*, "when fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, at the time it seems proof like no other, that not only does God exist, you're doing his will." Similarly, in Tarantino's

combination of Ezekiel 25:17 and the opening monologue of *Karate Kiba* (Simon Nuchtern, 1976) in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) quotes “And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord, when I lay my vengeance upon thee.” In *Inglourious Basterds*, the Jews are able to strike out against the Nazis in what can be implied to be an act of God. During one scene, terrified Nazi soldiers even call one of the Basterds, Donnie Donowitz a.k.a “The Bear Jew” (Eli Roth), a Golem in reference to a Jewish clay monster that was brought to life by a Rabbi to defend Jews from their anti-Semitic attackers. Even Shosanna’s adopted name, Emmanuelle, means “God is with us” in Hebrew.² For Tarantino, we can therefore conclude that this act of Jewish revenge against Hitler and the Nazis, no matter how horrific, can be endorsed by God. Certainly this concept of God endorsing revenge will be one of the most inflammatory points of the movie, and the one with which many people will disagree the most. But the idea does not lack precedence. In Steven Spielberg’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), the Nazis are obliterated by the supernatural powers of an omnipotent Jewish God released from an ancient Jewish artifact. By contrast, when all-American hero *Indiana Jones* (Harrison Ford) bumps into Adolf Hitler (Michael Sheard) at a book-burning rally in Berlin during *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), he is left silent and dumbstruck as the Nazi leader signs an

autograph for him. Even in Spielberg's early films, the caricatured and comic book Nazis cannot escape the Jewish revenge only set forth against them by God.

Audiences certainly don't have to agree with Tarantino's re-historicizing of World War II or his viewpoint on revenge, but he presents a platform to general audiences that can spark a moral and religious debate on the controversial concept of revenge. These ideas are personal and, in this context, depend on one's relationship to the Holocaust. Even for some of the young Jewish actors of the film, the Holocaust hits home. Eli Roth lost relatives during the Holocaust and actress Mélanie Laurent's grandfather was an Auschwitz survivor. In fact, Laurent's grandfather implored her to take this role in order to help her carry out his dream of killing Hitler, even if it is only in a movie.³ *Inglourious Basterds* asks more questions than it chooses to answer, and some people may be put off by Tarantino's trademark violence, but the film nonetheless will allow viewers to look inside themselves to examine this issue.

¹ Daniel Mendelsohn. "Inglourious Basterds: When Jews Attack." *Newsweek*. 31 Aug 2009. <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/212016>>. Online.

² [tp://www.thinkbabynames.com/meaning/0/Emmanuelle](http://www.thinkbabynames.com/meaning/0/Emmanuelle).

³ Naomi Pfefferman. "Revenge of the Jews, Tarantino Style." *Jewish Journal*. 18 Aug 2009. <http://www.jewishjournal.com/cover_story/article/revenge_of_the_jews_tarantino_style_20090818/>. Online.